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SUBJECT: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ARMENIA'S DISJOINTED OPPOSITION?

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Classified By: Ambassador Marie L. Yovanovitch. Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Growing public skepticism and unease with President Sargsian's handling of Turkey-Armenia negotiations and talks on Nagorno-Karabakh have created an opportunity for Armenia's opposition forces to rally around their common opposition to the President on these issues. The three main opposition groups -- the ultra-nationalist ARF-Dashnaktsutyun (Dashnaks), Levon Ter-Petrossian's Armenian National Congress (ANC), and the Heritage Party -- have all called for Armenia to pull out of talks with Turkey and denounced alleged Armenian concessions on N-K. A raucous two-day conference organized by the Dashnaks in Stepanakert in July galvanized popular opposition to Sargsian's policies and seemingly laid the groundwork for the opposition to cooperate in opposing them. They are following up with a much-publicized demonstration on September 2 in Yerevan.

¶2. (C) Armenia's failure to achieve real progress toward normalization and a border opening with Turkey by the time of the Turkey-Armenia soccer match in October would create a clear danger point for Sargsian and his government, though most of our interlocutors downplay scenarios that could lead to the President's removal. Fortunately for Sargsian, personal rivalries and differing perspectives among the three opposition groups will likely hinder their ability to form and maintain a united front. The rising and increasingly vocal criticism of the President's foreign policies, however, make significant, near-term concessions on N-K very unlikely, and ensure that Sargsian will stay away from the Turkey-Armenia soccer match in October in the absence of visible progress toward a deal. END SUMMARY.

COMMON CAUSE FOR OPPOSITIONISTS?

¶3. (C) President Sargsian and his government, especially Foreign Minister Nalbandian, are under increasing fire for Armenia's pursuit of normalization of relations with Turkey in the face of perceived Turkish unwillingness to move the process forward. That criticism has spilled over into the N-K issue, where opposition groups and many in Karabakh accuse Sargsian of risking N-K's security in order to get a deal. All three of Armenia's main opposition groups -- the Dashnaks, Raffi Hovanessian's Heritage Party, and LTP's ANC -- have called for an end to talks with Turkey and reassurance that the GOAM is holding firm on N-K. The convergence of opposition positions on these two hot-button issues presents an opportunity for opposition leaders to join forces, or at least coordinate tactics, to ratchet up pressure on the President. A closer look at the long-term agendas and personal rivalries among the three groups,

however, suggests that this might be more difficult than it would appear.

DASHNAKS: LEADING THE CHARGE AGAINST TURKEY TALKS

¶4. (C) The loudest and most strident criticism of Armenian policy on Turkey and N-K has come from the Dashnaks, President Sargsian's former governing partner that bolted the ruling coalition in the spring over foreign policy concerns. The Dashnaks organized a high-profile conference in Stepanakert in July to promote the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh and warn against Sargsian's pursuit of an N-K deal through the Minsk Group process. The conference, which included well-known diaspora figures and Armenian heavyweights such as former Foreign Minister Oskanian, galvanized popular sentiment against territorial concessions on N-K and gave voice to growing suspicion that Armenia has been duped by the Turks in its pursuit of normalization.

¶5. (C) According to Tevan Poghosian, a political observer with strong ties to Nagorno-Karabakh, the Dashnaks have two main objectives -- to position themselves as the leading proponent of the nationalist perspective, and to ensure that their concerns remain on the Government's agenda. For the Dashnaks, he said, ideology and the nationalist cause is more important than shifting political alliances and tactical advantage. In fact, the Dashnaks have had a decade-long cooperative relationship with the Kocharyan-Sargsian regime, which they have used effectively to advance their (nationalist) view of Armenia's future. Like Poghosian, most observers believe the Dashnaks see their role as influencing the direction of the party in power rather than engaging in active opposition to the authorities. This has given rise to

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the charge by supporters of other opposition groups that the Dashnaks, despite having left the coalition, are not part of the "real opposition." But for now, the Dashnaks are causing the Government some discomfort.

ANC PLATFORM ECHOES DASHNAKS

¶6. (C) Although former president Levon Ter-Petrossian, leader of the opposition ANC, has advocated for normalization with Turkey throughout his political career and was forced from office for his pursuit of an N-K settlement, the ANC "opposition platform" he announced on June 12 included strong language against the idea of a historical commission with Turkey (which, he claimed, called into question the "genocide"), and called for inclusion of Nagorno-Karabakh "officials" in the Minsk Group process. Most view LTP's adoption of these nationalist issues as little more than political tactics. Larissa Minasyan, Executive Director of the Open Society Institute, told us "they're in a difficult position; they had opposed the Government saying they were open to rapprochement and open on N-K, but now the Government has co-opted those positions."

¶7. (C) Despite the skepticism, the ANC has declared itself open to cooperation with other "healthy" political forces that support the ANC platform. On the surface, this would appear to include the Dashnaks. However, the platform also includes issues such as the release of political prisoners (mostly ANC supporters arrested following the disputed 2008 presidential election), snap parliamentary and presidential elections, and the resignation of President Sargsian. Such demands are anathema to the Dashnaks, prompting Dashnak parliamentary leader Vahan Hovanessian to comment that it is "unclear what positions the two parties share." In fact, LTP's top lieutenants have indicated privately to us that the ANC would drop its opposition to Sargsian's foreign policy if the President were to release the remaining prisoners.

¶ 8. (C) Political history also works against Dashnak cooperation with the ANC: in 1994, then-President Ter-Petrossian banned the Dashnaksutyun and imprisoned several of its leaders (including Vahan Hovanessian). The jailed Dashnaks were subsequently released by President Kocharian, Serzh Sargsian's political mentor. In addition, the Dashnaks bitterly opposed Ter-Petrossian's forward-leaning policies on Turkey and N-K during his years as president, much as they rail against Sargsian's approach today.

¶ 9. (C) Its purported offer of cooperation having been spurned by the Dashnaks (and Heritage), the ANC is set to return to the streets with a protest rally on September 19. Although LTP and other ANC representatives have been criss-crossing the country on a kind of "listening tour" in recent weeks, it is unclear whether they can breathe new life into street protests that have steadily lost steam since the deadly post-election violence of March 1, 2008. The ANC may well use the Turkey and N-K issues in an effort to boost interest in the upcoming rally. That tactic, however, has already been undercut by the Dashnaks, who have scheduled their own demonstration to protest the Government's foreign policy on September 2, the anniversary of the declaration of independence by the "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic."

HERITAGE PARTY BEARISH ON COOPERATION

¶ 10. (C) The third significant opposition force, Raffi Hovanessian's Heritage Party, has lined up with the Dashnaks and the ANC in opposing Armenian policy on Turkey and N-K. In June, Hovanessian called for new cooperation among all major opposition forces. But two months later, the air has apparently gone out of that balloon. On August 4, Hovanessian announced his party's intention to "act more independently." As a diaspora Armenian himself, Hovanessian's personal convictions on issues like Turkey and N-K are in some respects similar to Dashnak views. But the Heritage agenda -- which lays heavy emphasis on political reform, rule of law, human rights, and democratization -- is significantly broader than the Dashnaks'. Not surprisingly, therefore, Heritage parliamentary faction secretary Stepan Safarian scoffs at the idea that Heritage could act in tandem with "the imitation opposition."

¶ 11. (C) Efforts by Heritage and the ANC to forge a united front against the Kocharian-Sargsian regime have a long and unhappy history. According to Safarian, Heritage felt itself "obligated" to support LTP's presidential bid in 2008 only because Raffi Hovanessian was legally barred from running

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over a citizenship issue (an issue that will not be a factor in 2013, when Hovanessian is widely expected to run for president). The ANC, Safarian said, was the only party in 2008 running a candidate that was not acting as a "puppet" of the ruling authorities. Although many Heritage leaders (including, to a limited extent, Hovanessian himself) supported the post-election demonstrations led by LTP, Safarian openly blames LTP for the bloody crackdown of March 1, which he claims "could have been avoided if LTP had made other choices."

¶ 12. (C) Prospects for ANC collaboration with Heritage were further damaged in the May 2009 race for Yerevan mayor, in which the two parties failed to agree on a joint candidate list. Heritage ultimately opted not to field any candidate in order to avoid splitting the opposition, and gave lukewarm support to LTP's candidacy. But according to Safarian, Heritage made it clear that this was "the last time we will support LTP's interests."

HOW MUCH RISK FOR SARGSIAN?

¶13. (C) Although President Sargsian clearly benefits from the clashing agendas and personal rivalries among the three main opposition groups, a collapse of Armenia's diplomatic effort with Turkey could still create a danger point for the President, whose domestic support remains anemic. Sargsian would clearly be weakened by such a development, but few here believe it likely that Sargsian would fall from power. The Dashnaks have directed their fire at Foreign Minister Nalbandian, a possible sign that he could be made the scapegoat if the Turkey-Armenia process collapses. Former Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian, another potential presidential candidate in 2013, believes Sargsian will be able to weather the storm even if the process with Turkey leads to a dead end. "Moving forward on N-K," however, "would be much more dangerous," he said.

¶14. (C) Leaving aside the existential risk to Sargsian and his government, there is little question that the vehemence with which the opposition movements (each for different reasons) are attacking the President over his foreign policy has limited Sargsian's room for maneuver as negotiations on Turkey and N-K go forward. The N-K issue, in particular, is one that stirs passions among Armenians well beyond the nationalist fringe, and has the demonstrated potential to bring down a government. Major, near-term concessions by Armenia in the N-K negotiations are therefore unlikely. On Turkey, the growing perception, exploited by all opposition parties, that the Armenians have (once again) been outwitted by the Turks makes it almost certain that Sargsian will follow through on his pledge not to go to Turkey for the October 14 soccer match in the absence of visible progress toward closing the deal on normalization.

YOVANOVITCH